

# Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune

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***Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun*** (commonly known by its French title, ***Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune***, pronounced [pʁɛlyd a lapʁɛmɛdi doe fon]) is a musical composition for orchestra by Claude Debussy, approximately 10 minutes in duration. It was first performed in Paris on December 22, 1894 conducted by Gustave Doret.<sup>[1][2]</sup>

## Contents

- 1 Inspiration and influence
- 2 Composition
- 3 In popular culture
- 4 Footnotes
- 5 Sources
- 6 External links



Lydia Nelidova and Vaslav Nijinsky performing the *Pas de deux* from "L'après-midi d'un faune", Paris, 1912.

## Inspiration and influence

The composition was inspired by the poem *L'Après-midi d'un faune* by Stéphane Mallarmé, and later formed the basis for a ballet choreographed by Vaslav Nijinsky. It is one of Debussy's most famous works and is considered a turning point in the history of music; composer-conductor Pierre Boulez even dates the awakening of modern music from this score, observing that "the flute of the faun brought new breath to the art of music."<sup>[3]</sup> It is a work that barely grasps onto tonality and harmonic function.

About his composition Debussy wrote:

“ The music of this prelude is a very free illustration of Mallarmé's beautiful poem. By no means does it claim to be a synthesis of it. Rather there is a succession of scenes through which pass the desires and dreams of the faun in the heat of the afternoon. Then, tired of pursuing the timorous flight of nymphs and naiads, he succumbs to intoxicating sleep, in which he can finally realize his dreams of possession in universal Nature.<sup>[4]</sup> ”

The opening flute solo is one the most famous passages in musical modernism,<sup>[*citation needed*]</sup> consisting of a chromatic descent to a tritone below the original pitch, and the subsequent ascent.

## Composition

The work is scored for three flutes, two oboes, cor anglais, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, two harps, two crotales and strings. Notable is the absence of trumpets, trombones, and timpani.

Although it is tempting to call this piece a tone poem, there is very little musical literalism in the piece; instead, the languorous melody and shimmering orchestration as a whole evoke the eroticism of Mallarmé's poem.

“ [This prelude] was [Debussy's] musical response to the poem of Stephane Mallarmé' (1842-1898), in which a faun playing his pan-pipes alone in the woods becomes aroused by passing nymphs and naiads, pursues them unsuccessfully, then wearily abandons himself to a sleep filled with visions. Though called a "prelude," the work is nevertheless complete – an evocation of the feelings of the poem as a whole.<sup>[5]</sup> ”

The work is called a prelude because Debussy intended to write a suite of three movements – Prelude, Interlude, and Final Paraphrase – but the latter two were never composed.

The *Prélude* at first listening seems improvisational and almost free-form; however, closer observation will demonstrate that the piece consists of a complex organization of musical cells, motifs carefully developed and traded between members of the orchestra. A close analysis of the piece yields a deep appreciation of the ultimate compositional economy of Debussy's craft.

The main musical themes are introduced by woodwinds, with delicate but harmonically advanced underpinnings of muted horns, strings and harp. Recurring tools in Debussy's compositional arsenal make appearances in this piece: Bracing whole-tone scale runs, harmonic fluidity without lengthy modulations between central keys, tritones in both melody and harmony. The development of the slow main theme moves fluidly between 9/8, 6/8 and 12/8 meters. Debussy explores voicings and shading in his orchestration brilliantly, allowing the main melodic cell to move from solo flute to oboe, back to solo flute, then two unison flutes (yielding a completely different atmosphere to the melody), then clarinet, etc. Even the accompaniment explores alternate voicings; the flute duo's soaring, exotic melodic cells ride lush rolling strings with violas carrying the soprano part over alto violins (the tone of a viola in its upper register being especially sumptuous). And, in the first minute of the piece, Debussy mischievously throws in a bar of complete silence, giving the listener the opportunity to explore the musical quality of negative space within a gentle flowing river of sound<sup>[citation needed]</sup>.

## In popular culture

- *Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun* is the first animated segment in Italian director and animator Bruno Bozzetto's 1977 film *Allegro non troppo*. While retaining Debussy's music, the on-screen story instead depicts an aging faun's vain attempts to recapture his youth.
- The theme features prominently in the 1949 film *Portrait of Jennie*, and is used as a musical motif for the etherial heroine played by Jennifer Jones.
- The work is also analyzed at the end of the 4th segment of Leonard Bernstein's 1973 Norton lecture

"The Unanswered Question". Bernstein corroborates the earlier statement that the piece stretches the limits of tonality, thus setting up the atonal works of the 20th century to come.

## Footnotes

- <sup>^</sup> "Pierre Meylan and Chris Walton. "Doret, Gustave." (http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/08029) . Oxford. http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com/subscriber/article/grove/music/08029. Retrieved 2009-05-25.
- <sup>^</sup> Fanning, Neil Cardew (2005). *All music guide to classical music: the definitive guide to classical music*. New York: Hal Leonard. p. 351.
- <sup>^</sup> Boulez, Pierre (1958), "Entries for a Musical Encyclopaedia: Claude Debussy", *Stocktakings from an Apprenticeship*, Oxford: Oxford University Press (published 1991), pp. 259–277, ISBN 0193112108
- <sup>^</sup> Original French: "*La musique de ce prélude est une illustration très libre du beau poème de Mallarmé; elle ne prétend pas en être une synthèse. Il s'agit plutôt de fonds successifs sur lesquels se meuvent les désirs et les rêves du faune dans la chaleur de cet après-midi. Enfin, las de poursuivre les nymphes et les naïades apeurées dans leur fuite, il s'abandonne à un sommeil enivrant, riche de songes enfin réalisés, de pleine possession dans l'universelle nature.*" Quoted in *Les poètes symbolistes et la musique: de Verlaine à Blok* (http://mediatheque.ircam.fr/hotes/snm/ITPR19DESG.html) by Hélène Desgraupes.
- <sup>^</sup> Burkhardt, Charles. 2004. *Anthology for Musical Analysis, Sixth Edition*. p. 402.

## Sources

Hendrik Lücke: Mallarmé - Debussy. Eine vergleichende Studie zur Kunstanschauung am Beispiel von „L'Après-midi d'un Faune“. (= Studien zur Musikwissenschaft, Bd. 4). Dr. Kovac, Hamburg 2005, ISBN 3-8300-1685-9. ==

## External links

- *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune* (http://patachonf.free.fr/musique/debussy/partition/p01.htm) , the score.
- Free recording (http://www.columbia.edu/cu/cuo/audio.html) by the Columbia University Orchestra.
- Program notes (http://www.kennedy-center.org/calendar/index.cfm?fuseaction=composition&composition\_id=2466) .
- Prelude to the Afternoon of a Faun: Free scores at the International Music Score Library Project.
- Video of the Ballet (http://www.dailymotion.com/relevance/search/debussy/video/x47mbv\_debussy-prelude\_music)

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Categories: Compositions by Claude Debussy | Symphonic poems

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